

French gender-neutral pronoun prompts debate

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French dictionary “Le Petit Robert” included “iel” in their online edition Nov. 16, 2021. “Iel” is defined as a gender-neutral pronoun that combines the french masculine pronoun “il” and the feminine pronoun “elle.”

In English, “they” can be used as a gender-neutral pronoun, according to Merriam-Webster. However, in French, the words that directly translate to “they” are either feminine or masculine. “Ils” refers to a group composed of only men or both men and women, while “elles” refers to a group of only women.

World Languages and Cultures Teacher Tamara Smith said the inclusion of iel in “Le Petit Robert” hints that large-scale change is occurring in France regarding the advocacy for a more inclusive language.

“It’s very interesting to see how language is an evolving thing,” she said. “The iel pronoun shows that there are speakers in the Francophone world who are looking for ways to have the language reflect non-binary identity.”

As a result of the inclusion of the new pronoun in “Le Petit Robert,” iel received backlash from major authorities and politicians in France, according to The New York Times.

World Languages and Cultures Teacher Patrick Mari-

nucci, who is from Québec, said France is more reluctant to social change in comparison to other Francophone locations. He said the polarizing views on the pronoun mirror disputes surrounding the creation of feminine alternatives to job titles, another recent debate in the Francophone world regarding inclusivity.

Member of the French National Assembly François Jolivet tweeted Nov. 16 that the addition of iel to “Le Petit Robert” is a sign of “wokeism,” which he said is disrespectful toward French values. Jean-Michel Blanquer, France’s minister of national education, quote-tweeted Jolivet in agreement, saying inclusive language is not the future of the French language.

According to The New York Times, some who condemn the pronoun believe it is a part of a “woke” attack on France issued by the U.S., aiming to spread radical political race and gender ideology.

Saoirse Burlingame (’24), who studies French, said she disagrees that “wokeism” will tear France apart. Rather, she said she thinks including iel in “Le Petit Robert” is an act of inclusivity that will unite people as it acknowledges identities out-

side of male and female.

“To be able to really express yourself is what unifies the place, if everybody is able to do that,” she said. “Not allowing the language to make those differentiations between people is just an oversimplification of people’s identities.”

According to France24, iel has the support of many young people in France who are more aware of LGBTQ+ issues.

Smith said she is not surprised that people had such strong reactions to the iel pronoun because of how central genders are to the French language.

“Language isn’t simply the means through which we communicate with one another, it’s how we conceive of the world and how we express who we are,” she said. “The concept of masculine and feminine identity is an integral part of how the language functions.”

Currently, there are no official grammar rules established about how to make verbs and adjectives agree with iel, so Marinucci said French-

speakers may be reluctant to use the pronoun in day-to-day speech.

“What do I do with iel?” he said. “I almost have to ask the person, ‘Do you feel better if I describe you with adjectives

that are feminine or masculine?” And then we go back to square one because that person actually is using iel not to be in that binary gender.”

Furthermore, Marinucci said politics plays a quintessential role in the debate around the pronoun.

Marinucci said the support behind far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour is “getting quite strong,” especially as the 2022 French presidential election approaches.

Le Pen and Zemmour have criticized iel, which Marinucci said could help them gain more public support.

“There’s also, I must say, a political background to all this,” he said. “These parties have attracted a really conservative audience and voters, and for a lot of them, this new pronoun is something that can be, in a way, shocking.”

Marinucci said towards the end of the 19th century French became “the unifying language” that brought France together, as the government sought to create one language for the nation and minimize regional languages.

Historically, Marinucci said many French people are “quite attached to that language.” For example, Marinucci said con-

servative institution l’Académie Française is an example of this devotion certain French people have to protecting the language.

“If you attend a meeting of l’Académie Française, you’d be surprised,” he said. “It looks

like an elderly home. These very old people, mostly white ... They have a view of really protecting the language, and, it’s something that should

not change too quickly. We really need to think twice before starting to implement new ways of saying things.”

However, Marinucci said he thinks the use of more inclusive language will become more normalized as many younger people are advocating for change.

“We have a new generation and people who are starting to see the world in a different way,” he said. “It will change, it will be accepted, but it might take a little more time.”

Likewise, Smith said she believes the inclusion of the pronoun will cause a “big shift” in the language. Yet, she said it’s development will progress slowly while Francophones take time to adapt.

“Simply including it in the dictionary acknowledges that this is a trend which has been noticed, but the inclusion of the pronoun doesn’t mean that this is now the norm for speakers to adopt throughout the Francophone world,” she said.

“Language is a tool for provoking thought and it’s also a tool which reflects thought. It will take generations of it gradually becoming used to the extent where... people don’t think of it as something different.”

Above all, Smith said the implementation of the iel pronoun has the potential to help ASL students feel confident in their identity when in language classes.

“Language is how we process and communicate who we are, and this is such a primal, personal issue,” she said. “When it comes to learning a language in the middle school and high school classroom ... the inclusion of the pronoun could open the door to students feeling fully supported and seen and able to fully express themselves.”

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- Saoirse Burlingame (’24)

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- Tamara Smith, World Language Teacher

Gender-Neutral Pronouns Worldwide



U.S.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary updated their definition of “they” to include the definition of a singular, gender-neutral pronoun in their online dictionary Sept. 18, 2019.

Source: The Guardian



Norway

The Language Council of Norway confirmed the widely-used gender-neutral pronoun “hen” is likely to be included in the official Norwegian language in 2022.

Source: The Guardian



Spain

Some Spanish-speaking countries use the term “elle,” although it has not been officially recognized as a gender-neutral pronoun.

Source: The Washington Post

